

Does It Get Better? LGBTQ Social Work Students and Experiences with Harmful
Discourse

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Abstract

Though the field of social work is grounded in social justice, the social work educational experience, including classrooms, may not live up to this value, especially for LGBTQ students. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this study examined the experiences of harmful discourse in social work classrooms for LGBTQ students. Findings indicate that students experienced being misgendered, tokenized, and erased through cis-/hetero-normative language and classroom teachings. Though social work is guided by frameworks of social justice, microaggressions and discrimination may be vaguely glossed over, if addressed at all. This study highlights the gap between the values social work teaches and how social work education is delivered.

Keywords: LGBTQ, Social Work, Classroom, Social Justice, Oppression

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Does It Get Better? LGBTQ Social Work Students and Experiences with Harmful Discourse

The preamble of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics begins with the commitment that social workers make to promote social justice and to end oppression and discrimination (NASW, 2017). The NASW Code of Ethics established the value of social justice and also calls for social workers to challenge injustices (NASW, 2017). These calls to end oppression, to promote justice, and challenge injustice must start in social work classrooms. Although many social work classrooms are often steeped in learning about social justice and the negative impact of such injustices, many classrooms are not free of injustice themselves (Austin, Craig, & McInroy, 2016; Chinell, 2011; Dentato et al., 2016; Hylton, 2005). Many of the injustices experienced in classrooms occur because of harmful discourse within classrooms, and often this harmful discourse is not interrupted, though there is a clear call to do so in the code of ethics. This phenomenon necessitates the exploration of harmful classroom discourse, the interruption or lack thereof, and the effect that this may have on LGBTQ social work students. In order to explore how social work values may affect students' experiences with discrimination in classes, this study examines the occurrence of harmful discourse within social work classrooms, specifically through the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) MSW and PhD social work students. For the purposes of this research, the umbrella term LGBTQ will be used to represent both the participants and the community, knowing that not everyone may be represented by the letters in the term and that language continues to shift.

Background

Research has shown that many social work students have neutral or even negative attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals (Craig, Iacono, Paceley, Dentato, & Boyle, 2017; Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014; Logie, Bridge, & Bridge, 2007; Swank & Raiz, 2010; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Specifically, Logie et al. (2007) found that, among 197 participants, social work students generally had positive attitudes, but when broken down to specific groups under the LGBT umbrella, students reported lower levels of support toward bisexual and transgender people compared to gay and lesbian people. Swank & Raiz's (2010) study of more than 500 social work students highlight the large portions of students who fall into neutral categories; almost twenty percent of students reported they were neutral in response to a question regarding if there should be laws against LGB relationships.

Looking to LGBTQ social work students' experiences of feeling supported in schools of social work, a study of over 1,000 social work students found that regardless of how out they were on campus, 13.1% reported feelings of unsupportiveness, and over 31% reported they felt neutral in regards to feeling unsupported (Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014). A study of over 700 social work students found that while LGBQ students reported feeling supported by their school (76.7%), transgender students actually reported much a lower feeling of support (34.8%) (Craig, McInroy, Dentato, Austin, & Messinger, 2015). A large qualitative study of LGBTQ social work students found reports of feeling unsupported at school, unrepresented in course material, and that the schools could do better to integrate personal and

professional identities while being inclusive of LGBTQ identities (Craig, Iacono, Paceley, Dentato, & Boyle, 2017).

These negative attitudes and experiences often lead to discriminatory incidents directed at LGBTQ students in the classroom, such as assumptions of heterosexuality, privileging heterosexuality in classroom discussions and content, or even more overt experiences like being expected to be the expert on LGBTQ topics. Environments often felt so unsafe that students did not share their sexual orientation or gender identity, and lastly experiences of microaggressions from both faculty and other students (Austin et al., 2016; Chinell, 2011; Dentato et al., 2016; Hylton, 2005). Such experiences can have negative consequences that affect LGBTQ students, such as increased alcohol and drug use (Reed, Prado, Matsumoto, & Amaro, 2010), and negative mental health outcomes (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Woodford, Han, Craig, & Matney, 2014).

Sue and Constantine (2007) note that discourse turned harmful can lead to difficult conversations that many classroom instructors are not prepared to facilitate, which can have dire consequences on students' mental health and educational attainment. When the classroom feels like a hostile learning environment, it can lead to educational disengagement and disillusionment and feelings of not being supported (Craig, Dentato, Messinger, & McInroy, 2014; Hylton, 2005; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). Research has highlighted the professor's role in interrupting discrimination in the classroom as a tool of validation for marginalized students (Linley et al., 2016). These scholars have called for additional research on the educational impacts of experiencing homophobia and heterosexism in higher education classrooms (Linley et al., 2016).

In recognizing that the social work classroom can be an unwelcoming environment for LGBTQ students, it is important to also acknowledge the need for social workers to interrupt injustice. Social work students learn about injustice and its negative effects in social work education settings, yet many may not gain the skills necessary to interrupt injustice, as they are called to do so via the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017). There is little research available on the disruption of injustice in social work classrooms. However, one study notes that students were initially surprised to encounter homophobia and heterosexism in social work classes, and even more shocked when such experiences were not engaged by their peers or their professors (Chinell, 2011). An additional study with lesbian and bisexual social work students found students consistently experienced subtle yet pervasive heteronormativity in schools of social work (Hylton, 2005). A study of a small sample of BSW programs in HBCU's (2017) found that most BSW program directors believe that their schools challenge misinformation about clients who are lesbian or gay (Gates, Quinn, & Phillips, 2017), this finding supports the belief that interrupting harmful attitudes is important to social work education administrators, yet previous findings contradict the finding that challenges are actually happening.

Given past research highlighting that instances of anti-LGBTQ discrimination take place in social work classroom settings, it leads to the question of what, if anything, leads someone (an individual, a peer, or a professor) to interject? It is important to examine this topic within social work because of the unique commitment that social workers have to practice through a lens of social justice (NASW, 2017). This study focuses on the experiences of LGBTQ MSW and PhD students in social work education

programs who have experienced homophobia and/or transphobia in the classroom and explores if, how, and by whom these instances of harmful discourse were interrupted.

Method

A phenomenological approach was used for this study, as phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals with shared identities or ways of being, and seeks to grasp the universal essence of these experiences (Creswell, 2013). This methodology allows researchers to identify meaningful statements that offer a more nuanced understanding of how each participant experiences the phenomenon; in this case, harmful discourse on LGBTQ topics in a social work classroom setting. This approach is best for evolving pressing issues and making unheard voices heard (Lester, 1999).

This research study was driven by anti-oppressive theory (AOT), which contends that people are intersectional and our experiences are rooted in the identities that we hold and our identities are fluid and intersectional (Crenshaw, 2005; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Furthermore, AOT explores the idea that individual differences interact with one another, making the understanding of oppression, the experiences of oppression, and the interruption of oppression extremely difficult issue to confront. Additionally, AOT holds that in order to engage in anti-oppression work, organizations must first comprehend each way the people engaged in the work hold power and examine the ways that power is used (Dominelli, 1996).

Recruitment

The study received approval by the first author's university's institutional review board. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling of LGBTQ social work listserves and the researcher's personal networks.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview approach was used with the first author conducting all of the interviews, which lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. Face-to-face and phone interviews were conducted over a two-month period (January and February 2017). Individual qualitative interviews were utilized to gain insight into feelings, attitudes, and responses of the participants in relation to a personal experience in social work classrooms. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed, transcription of each interview was completed within one month of the interview by the primary researcher. Topics covered in the interview included descriptions of classroom experiences that were discriminatory or harmful, reactions to those experiences, and if any intervention occurred during those experiences. The following are example interview questions and prompts: *Can you tell me about a time when a social work class discussion or a teaching moment may have turned harmful? Can you talk about why it felt harmful? Did these experiences impact your engagement in classes or in the school overall?*

Themes from data were identified, which in turn, became the descriptions for the shared experiences of the phenomenon in question. Holistic coding methods were used to move to second cycle coding, then pattern coding was employed in order to reorganize and make the first cycle coding more meaningful (Saldaña, 2016). All data were managed and coded using ATLAS.ti by the primary researcher.

Results

The study sample consisted of 12 participants who were attending or had recently attended an accredited MSW or PhD social work program in the United States within the past five years. Students attended 7 different MSW or PhD programs in public, private

religious, and private non-religious schools, with most schools located in the western and mid-western United States. Participants self-identified as transgender, genderqueer, cisgender, lesbian, gay, pansexual, and/or queer. Eleven students self-identified as White, with one participant self-identifying as Multiracial.

Findings fall under three main categories which mirror the questions that led to the creation of this study: *Experiences of LGBTQ students in Social Work Classrooms*, *Intervention of Harmful Discourse*, and *Effect on LGBTQ Social Work Students*. Several subthemes emerged under each category. For the first main theme, *Experiences of LGBTQ students in Social Work Classrooms*, five subthemes emerged: Enforcing hetero/cisnormative standards through the erasure of LGBTQ people, misgendering, tokenizing, religious exclusion and LGBTQ identity, and pervasiveness of harmful discourse. The second theme, *Intervention of Harmful Discourse*, had 3 subthemes: Interruption by the student (themselves), lack of energy to interrupt, disruption by the professor. In the last main theme, *Effect on LGBTQ Social Work Students*, two subthemes emerged: Reigning in their outness (students reigning in their queerness) and catalyzing engagement.

Experiences of LGBTQ Students in Social Work Classrooms

Many participants shared about the different forms of discrimination they had faced in the classroom. Some focused more on implicit issues of cisnormativity/heteronormativity, while others named specific actions, such as the language being used, or instances of them being asked to represent their entire community and feeling tokenized. A few respondents also focused on how the religious beliefs of other students were used to further marginalize and harm them in educational

settings. This first major theme is split into five subthemes expanded on below: Enforcing hetero/cisnormative standards through the erasure of LGBTQ people, misgendering, tokenizing, religious exclusion and LGBTQ identity, and pervasiveness of harmful discourse.

Enforcing hetero/cisnormative standards through the erasure of LGBTQ people. The erasure of LGBTQ people, explicitly and also more subtly, through the enforcement of heteronormative and cisnormative standards in classrooms was a common experience for the participants in this study.

...Myself and my classmate, who was a queer cis female, we were both really excited and talking about this policy (DSM gender identity disorder vs gender dysphoria) and we were really fired up and we had had a lot of conversation and we came to class thinking “these people are going to love this! This is a fantastic debate and the only comment that the instructor kind of made following our presentation was that she didn’t know this was a ‘thing’.

In that instance, when the professor said she didn’t know this was a ‘thing,’ the student reported feeling that their experiences, and specifically the experiences of transgender individuals seeking therapy, were completely negated by the comment.

A participant reported occurrences during class discussions, specifically around client scenarios and class activities, when students would not accept a client’s sexual orientation as real or valid. For example, one respondent shared:

...Then when I was presenting the case, so this case was he identified as male, he identified as bisexual and he had some issues with his mother, so as I was bringing up his sexuality someone said, ‘it sounds like to me that maybe his identity is just coming out of his issues with his mother and maybe is actually straight or gay, but he is just identifying as bi because of his issue with his mother. Which was like, whoa.

In this scenario, the participant expressed feelings of erasure of sexual orientation as well as a reinforcement of the binary, in which only being heterosexual or not (i.e., gay) was the only conceivable options.

Misgendering. A prevalent theme throughout this study was the act of misgendering transgender students. Misgendering is defined as referring to someone, especially a transgender person, using a pronoun or word that does not correctly reflect the gender with which they identify, which has been found to be associated with felt stigma and psychological distress (McLemore, 2018). Respondents shared experiences about professors and students consistently using the wrong pronouns. One participant explained:

Like this professor would constantly misgender me. I had given her my pronouns but I usually get referred to as he, she, whatever. Like that is not they, them, their, that is not those words. And it's frustrating because if a classmate misgenders me, to be honest, it is always on me to fix it...And it's not like I make it hard for them, in several of my classes I have my name tag, like right in front of me with my name.

Reported occurrences were not isolated to the classroom, students also shared experiences of misgendering with clients they were seeing through their field placements or jobs. Several respondents reported the difficulty of classroom conversations to properly affirm trans-identified clients and students.

Tokenizing. Tokenism occurs when one member of a marginalized population is unreasonably treated as a representation of the group in which they belong; this role includes heightened visibility and scrutiny that can lead to stressful expectations not to make any mistakes so as not to poorly represent their community (LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2008). In many cases, the presence of LGBTQ students in a classroom was reported to prompt automatic assumptions that they would want to share their experience and expertise and that their experiences would be generalizable for their entire community. For instance, one participant shared the following:

I still feel like this addendum for everyone's practice, or everyone's life, or everyone's whatever... including the professor who would be like, 'well, we do have gays in this class.' And I am like, wow! Ah! We are everywhere, we just don't talk because it's not safe, because of this, right now, that's why.

Another participant shared:

...In four of my five classes, I was the only trans student, so I was tokenized. Only one teacher said 'we don't mean to tokenize you, if you don't feel comfortable answering these questions, feel free to say no.' The rest were just like, oh, you're trans, here, let's launch into a trans life discussion, let's not ask you if you are willing to do this, or if your boundaries prohibit you from doing this, or if you even want to do this, let's just use you as our trans Yoda. I am not the one paid to teach. And it's not on me to educate everyone.

Religious exclusion and LGBTQ identity. Nine of the 12 students interviewed for this study reported some experience with being excluded, dismissed, or minimized based on other student's religious identification. Several students described scenarios in which fellow classmates would declare they could not serve LGBTQ people. One student shared, "...she made this comment, something to the extent of 'if a gay person came to me I wouldn't be able to provide services because I am not comfortable with that.'"

While many of the examples involved fellow students proclaiming they could not serve LGBTQ clients, others went further and questioned when it was appropriate to offer conversion therapy. Another participant offered a story about students organizing a group called Christians in Social Work. When this individual asked if LGBTQ students were welcome in the group he received a hard no and was told that identifying as gay was a "non-negotiable in the group." A participant summed their experience of LGBTQ identity and religious exclusion by saying,

...I can imagine [how it] plays out in classrooms as well, like there is this feeling of like oh, religious students, we have to protect them and I am very much like, no we don't, like I don't want to purposefully piss them off or actually harm someone or have prejudice against someone because they have faith, but at the same time if we're here under the goal and mission of social justice like we need

to prioritize people who are being harmed, Christians don't want to talk about LGBT issues in the classroom or they want to believe that conversion therapy is real and that they are not being harmful. It is fine for them to believe that but then they pretend like they are being persecuted and that is not true.

Pervasiveness of Harmful Discourse. It is also important to note that these reported issues of harmful discourse were not infrequent or only experienced by some of the participants. In fact, when participants were asked about a time in a social work classroom when a teaching moment or class discussion turned harmful, the majority shared multiple specific incidents. Notable responses evidencing the pervasiveness of these incidents include, "I think it is just sort of a constant battle," "Yeah, I can think of a bunch," "That is like every social work class I've ever been in, so yeah," "Yeah, I think that happens all the time," and "To be candid, I feel like I am triggered all the time by stuff."

Intervention of Harmful Discourse

The second major theme is divided into three subthemes: Interruption by the student (themselves), lack of energy to interrupt, and disruption by the professor.

Interruption by the student. Students reported that often the harmful discourse was ignored and felt that if no one else were going to intercede they would do "the dirty work" themselves. Some noted that often there was an expectation for them to intervene when homophobia or transphobic words and actions occurred, and they felt like the only way harmful discourse would be interrupted was if they did it. For example, when prompted about interventions to harmful discourse, one respondent shared, "No one ever steps up for me unless I have made friends in that class and you think a professor would at least be willing to show that they care about trans rights [by stepping up to interrupt]."

On the other hand, many students who did not report interrupting the harmful discourse themselves shared that it was ignored and glazed over while class instructors remained silent. In response to asking for more information about interruption by the class instructor, a participant shared, “no, she remained quiet throughout...”. In another instance of seeking further clarification of the professor’s role, another student shared that “...our professor did not really engage. She didn’t say anything, I think she didn’t know what to do.”

Lack of energy to interrupt. While participants shared about having to intervene with classmates or teachers in educational spaces, many also talked about how some days it was just too much to have to perform this emotional labor and that they did not have energy to interrupt anymore. One student talked about how often, as a woman of color, she would lean on others with more privilege to engage these issues. She shared,

He [a White gay man] can physically and emotionally handle challenging someone when they say something offensive, and I just don’t have the capacity to do it. I’m tired. I’m worn out. And I get sick of not necessarily knowing how it is going to end up, which is something that I thought would dissipate or I wouldn’t have expected in the program. But I found that it was.

Another student shared similar feelings of exhaustion with having to intervene stating, “I would question things here and there, but sometimes I was just too tired, like, no, I am not going to this today.”

Disruption by the professor. Respondents reported that examples of professors engaging when harmful discourse took place were rare. Examples of professors stepping in were described as often times in the most egregious scenarios. In one instance, when a student proclaimed that they could not serve LGBTQ students, a participant described the response as a “half callout” saying:

She did actually call her out which was awesome...She did say something like that's not really a population that we can say that you are not going to work with them. I mean we cannot put you in an LGBT community center, but that doesn't mean you are not going to see those clients.

In response to a person who wanted to conduct conversion therapy, a student shared that the professor attempted to address it but it didn't go smoothly in the moment, so the professor circled back around at the beginning of the next class.

So that was interesting and then like on our next class the professor like kind of came back and was like I want to apologize for last class because we are having these very difficult discussions and it is just really awkward and I don't think I handled it very well and I just want to you know, kind of assert the idea that this is not a form a therapy and is not an intervention that we teach here. So I think really she tried to handle it well, um, but she clearly didn't know what to do in the moment.

Students had several interpretations for why professors did not intervene during harmful moments in class. One participant speculated that the professor wanted to stay neutral, or maybe that the professor felt that the student was the expert, so left the interruption up to the student. Another respondent offered a summary of their interpretation of the lack of disruption from their professor:

I know what you [the professor] are doing and you are wanting us to see eye to eye and play nice, but the message I am receiving as a queer person in this program and in this class today is that is more important for us to all get along than for us to actually get down to business and figure this out and to be uncomfortable and to examine it academically. You know, let alone to practice, so in the future, we can be better social workers and better direct practice providers... it scared me to be in that place...what I got out of my MSW program as a whole was that there are a lot of bad practitioners out there...they still don't get it, they have credentials but they don't get it.

Effect on LGBTQ Social Work Students

Students' reported being affected in several different ways by the harmful discourse experiences they encountered in social work classrooms. In the last main theme, two subthemes emerged: Reigning in their outness (students reigning in their

queerness) and catalyzing engagement. One way that many of the participants responded to this happening was to lower their engagement in the classroom context in order to feel safe or less vulnerable.

Reigning in their outness. Some of the participants responded by feeling the need to change themselves or reign in their queerness in order to protect themselves from future harm. Putting up one's guard was one way that a participant changed behavior in order to continue to be involved in the classroom:

I became more guarded, I became very conscious of code-switching, I knew when I was with people that I could share certain things with and talk about certain things with and when I was among just the general school population that I was much more guarded.

Another participant described feeling the need to hide their identity, in case they might need to perform straightness in order to be comfortable and secure amongst their professors and peers; "it felt very overwhelming and like how do I need to change myself in order to be considered to play the straight card if I come across obstacles." Other students talked about becoming less engaged and thinking of their education as something they just needed to get done with so they could move on.

Yes, it is important to engage and I did at times, but I felt like it wasn't worth it a lot of times; it was more like, let me get my degree and get out of here, you know what I am saying?

One participant reported weighing the professor's reaction (or lack of reaction) to the harmful discourse in the classroom, and made the conscious choice to disengage around these topics; "...at every stage the professor was kind of quiet in the face of all of those things, and at some point, I made an estimation that it is better to let things fly." Rather than using their time in the social work program as an opportunity to learn and grow while sharing their experiences and teaching others, many of the participants

reported that it was best to not make waves. Some reported perceiving their programs as simply obstacles to get through because of these issues of harmful discourse. One respondent connected the exhaustion with having to correct people with this view of just trying to make it through to get a degree:

I made an estimation about halfway through my program based on these experiences...that I was just kind of, keep my nose down and get through it, and get the credential and move on...I wasn't sure that I had the energy to constantly address or engage with students around their lack of knowledge around LGBT issues.

Catalyzing Engagement. On the other hand, some students had the opposite reaction, and instead of becoming less engaged, they reported experiencing a jump in motivation as a response to harmful incidents in the classroom. One participant shared that these issues of harmful discourse "...motivated me to be more active and engaged because I wanted to be able to call people out...it was definitely underlying motivation to be more like, 'no, this is not okay. I need to learn how to counter this.'" Another student described being able to pinpoint a single classroom incident as the power switch to become more engaged in these topics within a social work education setting; "...I think that moment actually ignited some of my radicalism, which I don't think is really radical, but I think it is seen as that in the academy. I say, 'no, I am not going to cover this up.'"

Ergo, given all of the negative experiences, there was, for some of the participants, a silver lining. Many described the experience of harmful discourse as a catalyst to engage in their community within the school and to connect with their peers who did have similar views on these issues.

I think what ended up happening was I would look for other students who got it, and so we would debrief later, like we would vent, and then I would get what I wanted out of my education and it would just be like after class, you know what I mean.

Another participant also was able to connect with a peer, in this case, another visibly queer student, and the two of them, despite having different areas of interest and practice, were able to support one another during issues of harmful discourse and create a supportive friendship in the face of homophobia and transphobia. This participant said,

I think my most enduring memory is how me and the other queer person found each other, and right away we immediately back each other up on anything, and we would sit next to each other. We were coming from totally different programs and we never took [class together] another again, but we are still Facebook friends, we have this bond of having sat through that class together... which was a nice thing to come out of that class, to feel like okay, we are on the same page about this, and we are going to have each other's backs.

Discussion and Implications

LGBTQ students experienced an overwhelming amount of discrimination in social work classrooms, much of the time perpetuated via harmful discourse. Most of the experiences were subtler types of discrimination or microaggressions (Chang & Chung, 2015; Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brennan, & Renn, 2015). Unfortunately, many times these negative experiences went uninterrupted and students were left to fend for themselves and on behalf of their entire communities. Some respondents felt tokenized and expressed a culture where LGBTQ students were expected to educate the classroom. Respondents also expressed feelings of being erased, and many times felt at odds with religious domination in social work classrooms. Several participants took on the emotional labor of interrupting harmful discourse, while others expressed a lack of energy or will to continually interrupt and educate others. Overall, these experiences point to the additional stress many students who identify with oppressed groups face, with multiple students getting to a point of simply not having the will or energy to defend themselves or others when faced with discrimination in classrooms.

While some participants shared that instructors may be open to interrupting harmful discourse, others often reported that professors ignored the comments and moved on, prioritizing a perceived cohesive classroom over addressing the discomfort and harm in the class. It is possible that these instructors did not have the tools or skills to be able to best engage these instances of harmful discourse and that better trainings for all social work educators, not only on topics related to LGBTQ identities but also on how to engage issues of homophobia and transphobia, could better support students of all identities. Though this study focused on LGBTQ students, participants noted the importance of thinking about discrimination through an intersectional lens.

Even as students felt harmed by the classroom experience, they often were resilient and found avenues of support and resistance. Students shared that some of these negative experiences stoked their social justice passions, while others said the experiences brought together LGBTQ students. The moments that brought togetherness for LGBTQ students created community and signaled who was a safe person and someone they could lean on. These connections were crucial for some participants, as these harmful moments continued throughout their education.

Although a few students did report being inspired to be more active in the LGBTQ community and more connected to social justice commitments after experiences like these in the classroom, it is important that schools recognize disengaged students are more likely to have negative educational experiences, outcomes, and be less effective practitioners (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008). Many of these experiences led the majority of the participants to educational disengagement as students, whether through a direct stand of choosing to disengage for safety, or taking on a mentality of “keep your

head down and move forward.” These differential actions between choosing to engage more or to keep one’s head down in protection may suggest further research explore what leads some students to self-interrupt while others shut down, and how these different reactions affect students in their learning processes and overall mental health.

This study offers several implications for social work education. Social issues are ever evolving; social work must promote and implement practices in order to ensure that practices, pedagogy, and curriculum follow the same evolutionary pattern. In order for schools of social work to adequately prepare active social change agents, they must fully engage the diverse set of students they serve.

Engaging and inspiring students in their educational process is a goal of many scholars; however, findings revealed that many students’ scholarly journeys were thwarted by negative experiences that snuffed out students’ commitment to their education. Engagement is a critical piece of a student’s learning process. Less engaged students are more likely to have negative outcomes (Appleton et al., 2008). If social work schools are not engaging their students, then students are not actualizing learning to their full capacity, which can, in turn, affect client service delivery. In some cases, the lack of attention to conversion/reparative therapy as a recognized unethical practice leaves the client, student, student colleagues, field placement, and community in jeopardy (Jenkins, & Johnston, 2004).

This study is a call to action for schools of social work. Schools need to implement a training mechanism in order to prepare faculty and staff to address harmful discourse in classrooms, not only around LGBTQ topics but across issues related to social justice. For some programs, more basic training might be necessary to first address

why this is important. Findings indicated that some instructors confused students' pronouns when they were wearing nametags; this suggests that some institutions might need a better understanding of marginalized students' experiences and the effect of those experiences before they can understand why interruption of injustice is important. These findings also demonstrate that training for instructors is likely necessary to build confidence and competence in interrupting harmful discourse. Such training will allow social workers to live out just values while also modeling behavior for students who aim to become effective practitioners. Wagaman, Shelton, & Carter (2018) offer strategies for queering BSW and MSW classroom in order to make them more affirming spaces, which include: Centering the queer experience, challenging dominant narrative that promote binary thinking, disrupting expectations, and engaging students in queer world making, or working toward creating a space that is accessible for all. These suggestions speak directly our call to action and offer concrete steps in addressing the discrimination LGBTQ students often face in social work classrooms, practitioners would be well served to read and incorporate this research into their pedagogical strategies.

Furthermore, Craig et al. (2016) and Craig et al. (2017) offer guidelines that address LGBQQ and transgender and nonbinary-affirming social work education that call for schools to address homophobia, heterosexism, misuse of pronouns, inclusivity in curriculum (including syllabi), diversity statements, and call for interruption of harassment of transgender or non-binary students when it arises on campuses and in classrooms. Schools of social work would be well-served to incorporate these guidelines into their approach to training their staff and educators. Research has shown that when institutions show competence in LGBT issues they better prepare students to serve the

LGBT community, thus solidifying the need for more training efforts, as described earlier (McCarty-Caplan, 2018).

This study highlights a gap that exists for LGBTQ social work students between the values espoused by the field and what is taking place in social work education settings. It is paramount that we fill this gap. If social workers are called to interrupt injustice, they must learn how to do it from social work educators in social work programs. Experiences of harmful discourse such as those described in this study should be engaged and interrupted, not only as the right thing to do but also as a moment of praxis. One participant provided a summary of such implications; “because if we aren’t learning how to have these conversations and disrupt from our professors, and they are perpetuating the notion that we shouldn’t, then what the f*ck is the point of social work?”

Limitations

There are several limitations of the study, beyond the note that qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable. One major limitation is that the majority of participants (91.6%) were White with no findings related to race; therefore, it is unknown how race and ethnicity may have influenced the experience of these incidents. Given minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), the effects of injustice for LGBTQ students of color are likely amplified and warrant exploration. Similarly, the sample did not include LGBTQ members from the bisexual community, whose experience was not captured in this study. Last, the findings concerning the rationale for instructors’ lack of intervening injustices was reported from a student perspective and, cannot accurately identify the instructors’ intentions or thought processes. Research from the instructor perspective would be a valuable addition to this area of inquiry.

Conclusion

This study sought to hear and amplify the voices behind unjust moments within social work classrooms as experienced by social work students, in order to begin to critically examine social work programs and classrooms as conducive learning environments all students. It is clear that LGBTQ students face injustice in classrooms and these finding suggests that not only are programs failing to support their LGBTQ students, but also that moment after moment is being passed up as an opportunity of modeling praxis. It is of utmost importance that social work educators take the mandate of social justice seriously and interrupt harmful discourse in the classroom. Moreover, this study hopes to be a step toward starting conversations not only within classrooms, but also among faculty and school policy makers about guidelines, expectations, and/or policies to engage and disrupt harmful discourse, not only for students' mental health and educational experiences but also because social workers are called to be socially just practitioners.

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